

# If You Have a Little Time to Spare in Southern Florida...

A brief guide on Florida Keys and nearby area attractions.

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While we are trying to make the guide as objective as we can, please note that it still may reflect some of our own preferences; use your own judgment when reading.

The guide is organized in sections based on the drive time (one way) from the conference location at the Hilton hotel, Key Largo.

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*Here and below all locations at Florida Keys are indicated by Route 1 mile markers in miles (notation MM X.X R/L), where X.X=0 is Key West, and Right-Left (R/L) sides are as if you are driving south toward Key West.*

*For example, Hilton Hotel is located on the right near Route 1 (Overseas Highway ) mile marker 97 (MM97.0 R).*

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## Within 20 minutes drive

**Dagny Johnson Key Largo Hammock Botanical State Park**, MM 106 L. Small fee, <http://www.floridastateparks.org/keylargo Hammock/>. A relatively little known park, best for hiking and running; 6 miles of trails, most trails are paved.

**Key Largo Parasail**, MM 104 R, <http://www.keylargoparasail.com/>, Ph. (305)-747-0032. Reliable prices. 30-minute rides. No need to call far ahead, can be arranged via a phone call to owner's cell literally minutes in advance. A thrill!

**Key Largo fishing charters**, <http://www.keys-backcountry-fishing.com/>, MM103 R, 305 451-3322, captain Bob, small groups (up to 4 persons) offshore, reef, backcountry and flats fishing.

**John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park** <http://www.pennekamp park.com/> , MM 102.5 L, ph. (305) 451-6300. Fee. **Well worth visiting.**

- Three beaches (Cannon Beach is shallow, good for children);
- Many picnic tables with a view;
- Nice large aquariums with local marine life;
- Two hiking trails (both are short and nice, Mangrove Trail is about water, Tamarind Trail runs through the tropical hammock);
- Kayak and canoe rentals;
- 2.5 hours glass bottom boat trips three times a day (most suitable to take on calm days);
- 2.5 hours snorkeling trips to various reefs. One hour boat roundtrip to the reef, 1.5 hours snorkeling. Highly recommended. Reefs are good and marine life is abundant. Do not forget your seasickness medicine (in our opinion Bonine generally is better than Dramamine).

**Dolphin Cove**, MM 101.9 R, <http://www.dolphinscove.com/>, Ph. 1-877-365-2683. Fee, rather expensive. Reservations recommended. Good for children.

- Swim with dolphins.
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**Albury fishing charters**, <http://www.alburyfishingcharters.com/>, 305-522 9438, MM 99.1L, turn right on Grouper terrace, then right on Ocean Bay Dr., Key Largo Marina, full, half day and nightly deep sea fishing;

**Rodeo charters**, <http://www.rodeocharters.com/>, 305-522 2638, MM 99.1L, right on Grouper terrace, then right on Ocean Bay Dr., Key Largo Marina, backcountry and deep sea fishing;

**Dolphin Plus**, <http://www.dolphinplus.com/>, MM 99L, turn to East Drive (oceanside), then right at stop sign and then ¼ mile down Ocean Bay Drive to 31 Corrine Pl., Ph. 1-866-860-7946. Reservations required. **Must do for families with grown-up children**. Good for adults. Swim with dolphins and sea lions.

**Sea Dwellers Dive Center**, MM100 R, <http://www.seadwellers.com/>, Ph. 1-800-451-3640. Diving center.

- Learn to dive, get certified;
- Good charter tours for PADI certified divers twice daily;
- Equipment rentals;
- Kayak tours on bay area (for entry level kayakers, best suited for families).

**Florida Keys Wild Bird Center**, MM 93.6 R, marked by wooden heron sign, ph. (305) 852-4486, <http://fkwbcc.org/>. No fee, donations accepted. We used to donate because birds care is very impressive here and is constantly improving over 20 years since our first visit. **Must see**.

- Different wildlife habitat;
- Largest and most diverse bird sanctuary on the Keys.
- Both caged and free birds. Injured birds (collected all over the keys and beyond) are treated here (they are in cages for protection). Free birds are extremely active at feeding times (call for schedule). Some birds are distinctive residents here for many years;
- Two short trails, bay-side boardwalk behind the center is lovely;
- Nice souvenir shop for bird lovers.
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**Harry Harris County Park**, aka **Tavernier Beach**, MM 92.5 L, then about 2 miles on Burton Drive. Usually wind-protected calm family-style beach. Tidal pool. Fee. Bath house.

Founder's Park, [http://keysrentalhouse.com/founders\\_park\\_islamorada.htm](http://keysrentalhouse.com/founders_park_islamorada.htm), MM86.5 R, (305) 853-1685. Parking fee. Good for short relaxation/swimming/snorkeling.

- Olympic size pool;
- Beach with roped-off swimming area;
- Rock jetties are at the right and left edges of the beach, away from roped-off area. They are frequent with barracudas, snappers, lobsters and other fish. Shallow coral patches are 15-30 meters offshore southern (left) jetty. Use of dive-in flag is required for snorkeling away from roped area, flags can be rented on site.

**Windley Key Fossil Reef State Geological site**, MM 85.5 R ph. (305) 664-4815, <http://www.floridastateparks.org/windleykey/>, call ahead or stop by, site may be closed occasionally. No fee. No facilities except picnic tables.

- Several trails, longest is about ½ mile;
- Petrified coral reef, fossilized shells, old quarries.

**Theater of the Sea**, MM 84.5 L, Ph. (305) 664-2431, [www.theaterofthesea.com/](http://www.theaterofthesea.com/). Fee. Expensive. **Must do for families with children**. May be crowded, though.

- Dolphins and sea lions shows;
- Swim with dolphins, sea lions, stingrays;
- Beach, swimming;
- 4 hours snorkel and adventure cruises (visit Lignumvitae Key (see below), learn Indian history, snorkel, feed tarpons. Snorkeling time is limited).

**Robbie's Marina**, MM 77.5 R, Ph. (305) 664-8070, <http://robbies.com/>. Place is looking deceptively old, but it is actually a pretty good stop to see a typical key's marine life.

- Feed tarpons from the dock;
- Fishing, charter fishing, private boat rentals;
- Snorkeling trips 3 times a day;
- Rent a kayak to paddle to Indian Key (20-30 minutes paddle) for picnicking and snorkeling at shallow waters. Good number of fish and corals there. Ask at Robbie's for directions and best snorkeling places around this small, uninhabited island.
- Restaurant Hungry Tarpon (average).

**Lignumvitae Key**, MM 77.5, <http://www.floridastateparks.org/lignumvitaekey/>.

- Uninhabited island, botanical site, accessible only by boat.
- Tours of the old house and surroundings, some short trails (only with ranger). Good for history lovers. Contact either Robbie's Marina or Theater of the Sea (see above).

#### **Some restaurants to consider:**

- **The Buzzard's Roost Restaurant**, <http://www.buzzardsroostkeylargo.com/>, 21 Garden Cove Drive, MM 106.5 L, simple unpretended dining close to water/marina;
- **Num-Thai & Sushi Bar Restaurant**, MM 103.2 R, mixture of Thai and Japanese cuisine (the only relatively good asian eatery in vicinity), 305) 451-5955;
- **Fish House Restaurant and Fish House Encore**, <http://www.fishhouse.com/>, seafood, MM 102.4L, 305-451-4665 (Restaurant), 305-451-0650 (Encore). Share the same parking lot. Fish Encore is nicer in our opinion, it has wider menu list and overall looks better. Fish House restaurant also houses small fresh fish shop.
- **Pilot House Restaurant**, <http://www.pilothousemarina.com/home.html>, MM 99.1L, turn right on Grouper terrace, then right on Ocean Bay Dr., then left to 13 Seagate Boulevard,

located at Key Largo marina, American and seafood, glass bottom bar (nice, but environment may be quite loud, live music on some evenings), (305) 451-3142;

- **Pierre's**, <http://www.pierres-restaurant.com/> - French, expensive, MM 81.6 R, (305) 664-3225;
- **Morada Bay Beach Café**, seafood, <http://www.moradabay-restaurant.com/>, MM 81.6 R, (305) 664-0604;
- **The Green Turtle Inn Restaurant**, <http://www.greenturtleinn.com/>, not bad variety of food (for key's standards), though better to stick to seafood, MM 81.2 L, (305) 664-2006;
- **Lazy Days Restaurant**, <http://www.lazydaysrestaurant.com/>, seafood, usually pretty fresh, MM 79.9 L, (305) 664-5256

## Within approximately 1 hour drive

The furthest locations in this section, Marathon Key southbound and Miami Zoo northbound, may take up to 1.5 hours one way with traffic; without traffic they are easily less than one hour drive.

### Southbound (to Key West):

**Long Key State Park**, MM 67.5 L, <http://www.floridastateparks.org/longkey/>, Ph. (305) 664-4815. Small fee. Very nice un-crowded park.

- 1.2 mile Gold Orb loop trail (<http://www.floridahikes.com/longkey/>) **is a must**. Better to do it in a counterclockwise direction.
- Nice picnicking;
- Long, very shallow Oceanside beach, facilities.
- Long Key Lakes Canoe Trail at protected lagoon is worse considering, cheap canoe rentals are on site (call ahead).
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**Curry Hammock State Park**, <http://www.floridastateparks.org/curryhammock/>, MM 56.2 L, left to Little Crawl Key, (305) 289-2690.

- 1.5 miles trail at MM 55.2 R;
- Beaches, swimming, limited snorkeling in calm weather in grassy shallow waters;
- Canoe and kayak rentals;

**Captain Hook's Marina & Dive Center**, <http://www.captainhooks.com/>, MM 53 L, (305) 743-2444, (800) 278-4665, good dive center.

- Snorkeling trips;
- Reef and wreck diving trips;
- Diving lessons and certifications;
- Fishing trips;

- Boat rentals;

**Sombrero Beach**, MM 50 L, left after K-Mart, then go on Sombrero Beach Dr. (CR 931) all the way down to the ocean, (305) 292-4560. Very nice, usually non-crowded narrow, rather long beach. Free parking. Good swimming. May be a very good snorkeling at right conditions; the site even has some coral patches close to the shore. Few picnic tables. No facilities. Look for small burrowing owls at grassy areas. Well worth visiting.

**Hidden Harbor turtle hospital**, <http://www.turtlehospital.org/>, MM 48.5 R, 305-743-2552, 1.5 hour tours, limited access, reservations highly recommended. A very touching experience. Nice choice of sea turtle-related gifts <http://turtlehospitalstore.com/>.

**Seven Mile Bridge**, MM 47. Very nice views, especially at sunset, worth driving both ways (on a way to Key West or just to Bahia Honda State Park). **Must see**.

**Pigeon Key**, <http://www.pigeonkey.net/home.html> , MM47 L, accessible by walking 2.2 miles south on Seven Miles Bridge from MM 47 (may be restricted now) or via ferry from 1 Knights Key Boulevard, Marathon (ask at Pigeon Key Gift Shop At MM 47 L, 305 289-0025). Mostly for history lovers. Good photo ops. Nice views, strange feelings of solitude in a close vicinity to busy oceanway.

### **Northbound (mainland)**

**Everglades National Park**, <http://www.nps.gov/ever/index.htm> , Ernest Coe Visitor Center, 40001 State Road 9336, Homestead, 305-242-7700. National park fee.

Visitor center has short interpretive trail, suitable for kids. If you have limited time frame, no need to go past Royal Palm area (drive two miles past visitor center, then about 1 mile to the left). Go on Anhinga trail. It is an **absolutely must see** paved/boardwalk trail along the marshy area. You are guaranteed to see a lot of alligators, many birds and numerous fishes; the earlier you arrive the better your experience (the area may be crowded during the day). Allow minimum one hour for a loop trail. If you have time, you may also hike the non-spectacular Gumbo-Limbo trail here. If you have more time, go all the way (about 40 miles one way) toward Flamingo area, stopping alongside the road for short hikes or sightseeing. The area may seem monotonous at first, but we had been there numerous times and were rewarded with many spectacular nature displays (mostly birds, reptiles, fishes, deer, rabbits, occasional minks, otters, possums, raccoons, armadillos, foxes, shrews). Flamingo area was the site of the Flamingo hotel, now permanently closed after hurricanes Wilma and Katrina hit it hard. You can sign for several self-guided canoe tours at Flamingo (call 239-695-3101 for reservations) as well as for a guided boat tour (<http://evergladesnationalparkboattoursflamingo.com/>). We did most of the canoe trips and they are certainly rewarding if you like this type of activities.

**“Robert Is Here”** is a nice fruit and vegetable store (<http://www.robertishere.com/xcart/home.php> ) on the way to Everglades, in Homestead on intersections of SW 344<sup>th</sup> St and SW 192<sup>nd</sup> Ave (address is 19200 SW 344th St Homestead),

305-246-1592. **Must stop.** Very good selections of fruit and vegetables, some are very exotic and truly ripened, as you can never find in stores.

**Coral Castle**, <http://coralcastle.com/>, 28655 South Dixie Highway, Miami, (305) 248-6345. Good for short visits, especially with children.

**Biscayne National Park**, <http://www.nps.gov/bisc/index.htm>, 305-230-1144. National park, mostly consists of the shore area south of Miami and of several nearby islands.

- Dante Fascell Visitor Center (<http://hfc.nps.gov/carto/PDF/BISCmap2.pdf>), beach, swimming, snorkeling from ashore (recommended at calm weather only), good fishing from pier and from nice man-made wooded breakwater, bird and marine life watching, you may reserve (not pick up!) canoe, kayak and boat rentals here;
- Guided boat tours (<http://www.biscayneunderwater.com/>), 305-230-1100, snorkeling, scuba, diving, glass bottom boats, fishing, lobstering (in season), canoeing and kayaking.

**Fruit & Spice Park**, <http://fruitandspicepark.org/>, 24801 S.W. 187th Avenue, Homestead, Florida 305-247-5727. **Absolute must to visit for tropical fruit lovers.** May not be for everyone, but it is probably our favorite place in southern Florida in a last 20 years. The place is steadily recovering after damaging hurricane Andrew in Y1993. 36 acres of carefully arranged plants sectioned by continental and species origins. Something is always fruiting here in any season of the year. You allowed to pick (and eat) ripe fruits from the ground. The following fruit ripen in January: star fruits, black sapote, persimmons, antidesma, papaya, various guavas, many types of bananas, some avocados, akee, jaboticaba, canistel (egg fruit) and many others that we cannot remember the names of. Allow at least an hour for a brief visit, longer visit are better. Tours are offered, maybe they are good (we never took them).

**Monkey Jungle**, <http://www.monkeyjungle.com/>, (305) 235-1611, 14805 Southwest 216th St. Miami. **Certainly worth visiting.** Fee. Quite authentic monkey habitats, animals are roaming free on large territories, visitors allowed to feed them (in a special way) if monkeys are so inclined.

**Miami Zoo**, <http://www.miamimetrozoo.com/visit-the-zoo.asp>, 1 Zoo Boulevard 12400 SW 152 Street, Miami, (305) 251-0400. Zoo dedicated to endangered and rare species. Very large zoo territory is good for walking. 45 minutes safari tours, camel rides and hippo slide are very good for children (certain age restrictions apply). Overnight visits for groups, and golf cart 1.5-hour private tours should be very interesting for adults, too. **Worth visiting.**

## Over 1 hour drive one way

### Southbound

**Bahia Honda State Park**, <http://www.bahiahondapark.com/>, MM 36.8 L, (305) 872-2353. Very popular (for a reason!) state park. Access regulated by limited parking space, better come before 10 am or after 3 pm in order to get in. Very picturesque park. **Must see.**

- Three large distinctive beaches. Calusa Beach is best for swimming with children, Loggerhead beach nice for shore strolling, swimming in calm weather, snorkeling;
- 1.5 hours near offshore snorkeling tours twice daily, reservations at (305) 872-3954;



- Sit-on kayak rentals;
- 3.5 miles bicycle trail (with rentals);
- Access to old high-raised bridge via short trail (nice views);
- Short .6 mile Silver Palm loop Trail starts at the end of Sandspur Beach access road;
- Sandspur beach is good for off-shore snorkeling in calm weather. Shallow water, grassy bottom. Shells and soft corals are frequent at the right season (spring and fall are best);
- Many seashore birds, especially early and late in the day.

**Torchwood Hammock Preserve**, Little Torch Key, MM 26 L, then south on Pirates Rd. Little known undeveloped hammock, good for hiking and bird photography.

**National Key Deer refuge**, Big Pine Key,

[http://www.floridawildlifeviewing.com/florida\\_animals\\_wildlife/key-deer-big-pine.htm](http://www.floridawildlifeviewing.com/florida_animals_wildlife/key-deer-big-pine.htm) , MM30 R, then 2 miles on Key Deer Blvd., 305 872-2239. Actually, if you are lucky, you may spot this miniature deer anywhere on the grassy areas along the Overseas Hwy (Rt.1) MM 33 to MM 29, and along the Key Deer Blvd. Approximately two miles north on Key Deer Blvd. on the left are two marked sites that offer short, but nice hikes:

- On the left short marked hike to Blue Hole, artificial pond with resident alligators, you may see many skunks, anoles and iguanas, some birds and small mammals;
- 1 mile long Watson trailhead is few hundred yards past Blue Hole on Key Deer Blvd.

**Key West**, MM0.0. **Must see**. The city probably still possesses the highest number of bars in the US on a given mile along the main street (Duval St.) and in the marina area. Shopping and bar hopping are the main attractions, also good are marina area, several city beaches on a southern part of the city between White street pier and Whitehead street, historic hotels, houses of good old American writers, Fort Zachary Taylor Historic State Park and beach

(<http://www.floridastateparks.org/forttaylor/>) – this is probably the best beach in Key West, Key West butterfly and Nature Conservatory (<http://www.keywestbutterfly.com/>), nice coffee shops and restaurants, relaxing lifestyle, etc... Parking is very limited in the city, we usually parks at parking garage on corner of Grinnell and Carolina Streets, at 300 Grinnell Street, Key West, FL. It is short 5-10 minute walk to the city center from here. More expensive parking is at back of Crown Plaza Hotel on 430 Duval St..

**Dry Tortugas National Park**, <http://www.nps.gov/dрто/index.htm>. That is a **must see for really adventurous**. Ferry from Key West takes about 2 hours one way, only one trip per day (early morning arrival, departure at around 5 pm). Snorkeling at Dry Tortugas is excellent; Fort Jefferson is unique and very picturesque. Don't forget to bring your own water. Real outdoor guys may do overnight trips. It is fantastic. We did it and enjoyed every minute of the experience. However, you should carefully read all the info about the place and be prepared because the islands have no water, no electricity and are literally deserted all the time except when daily cruises crowds (two ferry ships are carrying 300+ people daily at most) are present.

**Northbound:**

**Jungle Island** (formerly **Parrot Jungle**), <http://www.jungleisland.com/index.cfm>, 1111 Parrot Jungle Trail, Miami, (305) 400-7000. A mix between Disneyworld and zoo. Many shows, a lot

of animals in caged environment. Nice shady tropical-like forest settings, wonderful for hot days. Good for kids.

**Fairchild Tropical Gardens**, <http://www.fairchildgarden.org/>, 10901 Old Cutler Road, Coral Gables, 305 667-1651. **Must see.** One of the best (or likely THE best) tropical gardens in America. Probably one of the largest palm collections in the world. Tropical forest. Butterfly garden. Flowers. Very neat garden planning. 45 minutes tram tours. Guided tours.

**Everglades NP**, Shark Valley, <http://www.nps.gov/ever/planyourvisit/svdirections.htm>, Highway 41 (Tamiami Trail / SW 8th St.), 25 miles west from the Florida Turnpike exit 25, 305-221-8776. Access is through typical Everglades environment criss-crossed with ditches and canals. **Worth visiting.**

- 15 miles loop Tramway tours to observation tower (highest point in Everglades);
- Bicycle rentals, you can bike via narrow asphalted tram pass through the marshes and hammocks. Unique experience of biking very close to wild alligators (they are usually tame, but use common sense). Many small water birds.